

# **CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL**

Minutes of a meeting of the **Children and Families Scrutiny Committee**  
held on Monday, 8th June, 2009 at Committee Suite 1,2 & 3, Westfields,  
Middlewich Road, Sandbach CW11 1HZ

## **PRESENT**

Councillor R Westwood (Chairman)  
Councillor D Neilson (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors Rhoda Bailey, D Beckford, D Flude, J Goddard, O Hunter,  
G Merry, M Parsons, M Simon, L Smetham, D Thompson and T Jackson

## **Apologies**

Councillors A Kolker

## **7 OFFICERS PRESENT**

J Weeks, Strategic Director People  
B Hughes, Head of Services for Children and Families (Interim)  
R Jenkins, Services Manager Children and Families  
D J French, Scrutiny Officer

## **8 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the informal meeting of the Committee held on  
11 May be confirmed as a correct record.

## **9 DECLARATION OF INTEREST/PARTY WHIP**

There were no declarations made.

## **10 PUBLIC SPEAKING TIME/OPEN SESSION**

There were no Members of the Public present who wished to address the  
Committee.

## **11 WORK PROGRAMME UP-DATE**

The Committee considered a report on the current Work Programme. Members  
were advised that the Work Programme was a draft document that at this stage  
contained a number of items that had been brought forward from the four  
constituent Authorities and identified as a high, medium or low priority following  
the Scrutiny briefing session on 27 April.

There were a number of additional items identified by Members:

- Children's Centres – role, usage and services;
- Costs of transport for young people;
- Provision of support to families.

A meeting had been arranged between the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Committee, the Portfolio Holder and Head of Services for Children and Families to discuss the remit of the Committee and identify any further items considered appropriate for the Work Programme.

It was intended that a Scrutiny Toolkit would be developed to assess potential items for the Work Programme against a standard set of criteria.

Members of the Committee then suggested a number of other potential items for the Work Programme:

- School admissions process;
- Educational attainment across the Borough (not just South of the Borough);
- Residential placements.

In relation to Residential placements, Members were advised that a decision had been made by Cheshire County Council to close Redsands Residential Children's Home and in the meantime Ofsted approval had been sought for two replacement units in Crewe. While this approval was awaited, a decision had been made that it was not in the Redsands' residents best interests that they remain in the Unit. All 5 children/young people had therefore had alternative arrangements made. The two units in Crewe had now been approved by Ofsted and a safe recruitment process was underway to staff the units. A review of all residential provision in Cheshire East was to take place and the Head of Services for Children and Families suggested this may be a useful area for Scrutiny to consider as part of its Work Programme.

RESOLVED: That

(a) the current draft Work Programme as submitted be approved;

(b) the following items be added onto the Work Programme as potential items:

- Children's Centres – role, usage and services;
- Costs of transport for young people;
- Provision of support to families;
- School admissions process;
- Educational attainment across the Borough;
- Residential placements and Review of residential provision; and

(c) the Work Programme be considered further at the next meeting.

## **12 FORWARD PLAN - EXTRACTS**

The Committee considered the items currently on the Forward Plan that related to Children and Family services.

A question was asked in relation to the transitional arrangements for children with Special Educational Needs who transferred between educational establishments and also when they transferred from children's services into adult services. In response the Committee was advised that officers were aware of the importance

of having smooth transitional arrangements and that this should be helped by both children's and adult's social care services now being within one Directorate.

RESOLVED: That the Forward Plan extracts be noted.

### **13 CONSULTATIONS FROM CABINET**

There were no consultations from Cabinet for consideration at the meeting.

### **14 SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN**

The Committee considered a report of the Strategic Director – People on the issues and actions being taken to ensure a comprehensive response from the Council to the issues raised by Lord Laming in his report “The Protection of Children in England: A Progress Report”.

The report outlined that there was a significant level of national scrutiny of safeguarding and Lord Laming had made a number of recommendations for improvement. A detailed Action Plan had been produced for Cheshire East to address both the recommendations of Lord Laming and those identified following the Annual Performance Assessment (APA) of Cheshire held in 2008 which related to:

- Assessment Timescales;
- Securing placement stability for Looked After Children;
- Adoption;
- Private fostering.

The APA was to be replaced by the Comprehensive Area Assessment and there would be an annual inspection of safeguarding. No notice period would be given and up to 12 Inspectors would be involved, Government Office North West had advised that Cheshire East was likely to be one of the first authorities to be inspected.

The Committee was advised that overall, teams had exceeded the target for completing Assessments within the timescales required but it was important that Assessments were of a high quality as well as within timescale. There had been an increase in children subject to a Child Protection Plan to 146 children. The Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) had commissioned an external audit of all children under 5 years of age who were subject to a Child Protection Plan as those children were seen as the most vulnerable. The results of this audit would be a useful tool for assessing quality of assessment and intervention and highlighting key actions required and may be appropriate for the Committee to consider when available.

The numbers of Looked After Children had risen over the past two years and there were currently 368 such children in Cheshire East. It was important to secure the most appropriate placement so as to reduce the number of times a Looked After Child was moved between placements.

Adoption rates remained low but the numbers of children subject to placement orders and placed for adoption (but not yet adopted) had both increased considerably. It was hoped higher rates of adoption would result in the next year.

The procedure for private fostering arrangements, of which there were 6 in Cheshire East, was under review and a Champion had been identified.

In relation to the Lord Laming report, a key aspect was to ensure that children in need had early access to effective specialist service as well as indicating that more needed to be done regarding safeguarding and child protection across all front line services. An experienced social work practitioner had been commissioned by both Cheshire Councils to undertake a review of front line services to ensure there was sufficient capacity and that referral and assessments were timely and appropriate. The findings for Cheshire East included:

- Staffing – the staffing group was very stable and committed with low turnover and few permanent vacancies, this was very unusual in children's social care;
- Management – some teams were too large and to address this new roles of deputy/practice manager were to be introduced;
- Caseloads – these were very large in some cases and this was under review;
- Generic teams – most front line teams had generic caseloads which could cause difficulties for managers to oversee if there were competing priorities; this would be addressed by the new staff structure;
- Integrated Children's System (ICS) – Local Authorities were able to determine their own ICS processes, which was a way of managing the children's social care database, to meet local needs and Cheshire East would continue to use the PARIS system. The system had experienced a number of difficulties but liaison with other Authorities was underway and along with various other measures it was anticipated that these would be addressed;
- Early intervention – this was a key area identified by Laming and to assist with this, the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) was to be used. The CAF was a statutory tool for use by all agencies and was helpful in ensuring partners did not feel that they were acting in isolation. It was currently underdeveloped in Cheshire East but its development would be assessed as part of Ofsted's detailed inspection of Safeguarding and Looked After Children which was carried out on a three yearly basis.

The Committee was advised that a Multi-Agency preventative team was to be introduced which would comprise a range of agencies based in localities comprising representatives including from the police, Primary Care Trust, social care and education. This Team could then take referrals from the community which would then be assessed using the Common Assessment Framework. This should reduce the number of caseloads dealt with by staff as currently all referrals went to social care whereas some cases could more appropriately be dealt with in the community such as in Children's Centres or through Education Improvement Partnerships.

During discussion of the item the following points/issues were raised:

- It was important for Members to receive updates on stability and numbers of placements for Looked After Children;
- What awareness existed within the Council of numbers of migrant children in the Borough and the level of support needed?;
- The role of a multi agency team was supported but time needed to be allocated to ensure successful handovers could be achieved;

- The need for a manual back-up for occasions when the Integrated Children's System was not working;
- A proactive approach was to be adopted in relation to private fostering with links made with local community groups to ensure social care staff were aware of private fostering arrangements;
- The Lord Laming report indicated a high number of vacancies for children's social workers and high staff turnover rates – what was the position in Cheshire East? In response, the Committee was informed that there was a stable workforce in Cheshire East but this meant that staff were not always exposed to new thinking, however, the review of caseloads and introduction of a multi agency team meant that some staff time would be freed up to enable relevant training to be undertaken as well as team meetings to take place. In addition, a post had been created for an experienced practitioner to provide a consultancy, mentoring and shadowing role. There would also be a short term increase in staff to address the increased number of cases referred to social care;
- What provision was made for people who didn't speak English as their first language? In response the Committee was advised that interpretation and translation services were used and that the Primary Care Trusts had Health Visitors who were fluent in Polish. A significant number of migrant workers were young men who did not have families;
- Whether referrals were made to social care automatically where drug and alcohol abuse was evident or in cases of domestic violence? In response Members were advised that this was not the case at present but this was being addressed through the Local Safeguarding Children Board;
- Were Serious Case Review authors independent and what publicity was given to the final report in these cases? The Committee was advised that authors were independent and a list of authors was being developed. The results of a Review were assessed and graded by Ofsted. The Government was considering the extent of publicity to be given to Ofsted reports following Serious Case Reviews and would issue advice in due course, currently the Executive Summary was to be made public;
- The assessment target of 75% seemed low? Members were advised that a realistic target would be 80-85% but it was more important to ensure quality of assessment and some cases were more complex meaning timescales could not be met;
- Training would be available to Members shortly on safeguarding as well as Corporate Parenting;
- It was noted that the Laming Report referred to 11 million children in England and the figure was broken down into a number of categories and similar such figures could be made available for Cheshire East;
- It was noted that fees for court action to take a child into Local Authority Care had increased and although this would not deter a Local Authority from taking action required it could increase pressure on budgets; this may also result in an increase in voluntary agreements relating to Looked After Children and this would be monitored;
- What was the membership of the Local Safeguarding Children Board? Members were advised that partners were committed to their role on the Board and that senior representatives attended where possible although there were capacity difficulties for Third Sector representatives and also for the police who had to cover a number of areas/Boards;
- How could the Council ensure that resources were targeted effectively according to needs? The Committee was informed that a number of partners contributed to the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) and the Director of Public Health as well as the Director of Children's Services

and Director of Adult Services had clear obligations to sign up to the JSNA;

- In future schools judged as inadequate in their safeguarding measures by Ofsted would receive an inadequate judgement regardless of findings in any other areas.

RESOLVED: that

(a) the update on safeguarding and children's social care be noted; and

(b) a further update be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee to include reference to the following matters:

- The report and outcomes of the external audit of all cases of children under 5 years of age subject to a Child Protection Plan;
- The adoption rates for Cheshire East and whether any increase has been made;
- Staffing figures for children's social care including numbers of temporary appointments as outlined at the meeting;
- The outcome of the Ofsted Unannounced Inspection;
- Details regarding placements for Looked After Children;
- Detailed information relating to children in Cheshire East broken down into numbers of "children in need", those subject to a care order, numbers fostered etc based on the categories listed in Lord Laming's report.

The meeting commenced at 10.30 am and concluded at 12.30 pm

Councillor R Westwood (Chairman)